

# LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING

## Acknowledgement

### Introduction

The conversation I want to have with you today is not the one I thought I would have. When Tanya asked me to come to give this talk I tried to say No. You, it seemed to me, are the experts on listening and I am the perverse Brit you had the hubris to invent another human right; and failed to get anyone to fund me to follow through on my idea. Although I have carried it, like Jacob Marley's chains, with me into a strange variety of company.

If I had listened to myself I would not be here.

The origin of my initial paper was my role as a modest foot soldier in the tormented struggle of Unesco and the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). I organised a Unesco conference in rural Yorkshire! and for a while became a favoured rapporteur for endless Unesco meetings. There my brutal pleasure in the flexibility of the English language gave me a use value, and disproportionate power, in the deliberations I was involved in. However, a post-colonial and progressive global ambition to destabilise the hegemony of Western communicative power seemed to me to be distressingly Western in its individualism. To me the argument in its particulars seemed to be seriously one sided. The concern was with the right to control communication as production, and dissemination, and consumption: in my vulgar terms it was a concern with a right to utter, to publish, to broadcast, to consume—there was no reciprocal concern with an obligation to listen. So drawing on the idea of third generation human rights, and shamelessly making pragmatic use of relevant literature I proposed that since communication was in its essence dialogic we should recognize our obligation to understand. Hence —‘ the right to be understood.’

So I suppose it was reasonable to expect that I would arrive here with some capacity to expand on that initial formulation. However, a number of things impeded me: not the least the fact that as the product of North of England Methodism, ( where use of language was as important as theological insight in my Grandfather's dissection of the sermon as we stood outside the chapel every Sunday morning), I have a personal pleasure in the use of language, But, for me writing is a mysterious process that happens to me, rather than a technical competence of which I am master. I am seriously disinclined to unravel this mystery for fear that it might desert me. And in preparing this paper, given that it was not shaped by data or a strong job description, my words have seemingly gone in advance of my thinking. So I shall need your assistance to hold this together.

So: it turns out that having been the midwife to the right to be understood, I now want to be cautionary uncle to the still wobbly infant. Given that you have been working over months on listening I want to start by making my distinction between listening and understanding. Because, I want to make this a personal dialogue.

I will raise a number of concerns I have about understanding in the hope that you accept these as having some sort of generic relevance to our discussion. I will try to show the linkage between the points I have made.

### **From Listening to understanding -where are its foundational roots**

I want to make a distinction between listening and understanding. Listening it seems to me is an act of attention- a willingness to focus on the other, to heed both their presence and their communication. It is only a necessary precursor to understanding. All women and adolescents know what it is to be *listened to* without there being any consequent understanding.

Understanding on the other hand is an act of *empathetic comprehension* ∴ a willing searching after the others intention and message.

So in pursuing my notion of a right to be understood it might be appropriate to start with some consideration of what I think might have to go in the space between listening and understanding. At one level the critical ingredient is **the orientation we bring to the act of listening**. Where are we metaphorically standing when we choose ,or are required, to listen? What might be the well springs of humanity that make us even wish to understand. I think that it is necessary to start with at least an initial exposure of this question. For do we start from a perspective where we think that homo sapiens is pre-wired to be empathetic: and that it is only the brutalising effects of society and our alienation from our natural selves that renders the question of understanding problematic. Or , as good modernists, do we regard homo sapiens as inherently morally weak and in need of external ethical guidance. Or perhaps we are more optimistic and believe that in our social nature there lies the basis for us developing a sustainable capacity for understanding.

The first position might be represented by Levinas' argument that we have an inherent capacity for *being for the other*: in which case the communicative act that occurs in the process of listening is already intuitively positioned toward promoting understanding. Consequently where this understanding is currently absent we may look to the societal influences that are inhibiting our natural potential

The second position might be expressed by theocracies and their urging to mutual respect and consideration. In the Christian tradition there is the view that we have already fallen from grace and are in need of God's guidance and support to render us good citizens. - We might then look at the current malaise of moral authority and the erosion of ethical practice- as gloriously illustrated by the contemporary criminal self interest expressed in global finance markets. This then can be a challenge to secularism that does not 'understand' a theistic premise for shaping behaviour. We may look at the difficulty that the secular West has had in understanding that Muslim critiques of the West are not fundamentalist retreats from modernity- but a critique of the values and politics of the present. And that Jihad is not a fanatical call to violence: but can be also a personal quest for goodness.

Or it may be that in the third position we draw insights from the extensive literature on self and society and conclude that we are intrinsically social: but we may still conclude that our social nature does not necessarily equip us with the competences to be effectively competent listeners. In post modern parlance we are not too sure who we are: so we have an unstable platform from which to engage with the other. And if we do have a coherent sense of self then it is problematically circumscribed by the limits of our own culture. From this perspective we approach understanding as an illusive ideal. Certain only of our existential fluidity, and terrified that we might commit the sin of essentialism, the other can only, at best, be tentatively glimpsed. Claiming to understand would be personal hubris and academic suicide.

I don't intend to take this agenda any further here, but I feel a need to register as an analytic and methodological issue our need to ask ourselves where we fit into the rather vulgar framework I have sketched above. For I think that for each of us, our personal position on this issue is likely to be implicitly well developed: and I think it will provide a framework that will inform our more focused research questions.

### **A pedagogy for understanding in multiethnic societies?**

Of course there is an academic and commercial industry that believes that we can promote understanding through effective training. In the 1970s when Michael Argyle and others began their initial work on interpersonal communication, I was sceptical when it became converted to *social skills training*. But I went to a number of conferences and workshops and had something of a conversion experience and with a clinical psych colleague we started one of the first social skills training clinics within the Leicester health authority. Where, it has been said I was amazed at our success rate. But I discovered it was much easier to change someone's social skills than to change their self image. For some individuals I felt that we gave them the skills to expose themselves to a wider social environment in which they did not believe they had a right to belong. We introduced second order problems into their lives. And some people were content and fulfilled isolates: and should have the authenticity of their lifestyle acknowledged, rather than pathologised.

I should also note that it proved easier to train social skills than to practice them: I am pathologically sociable but socially inept; and I am always amazed at conferences at the flair of colleagues who flow into and out of conversations, whilst I bounce around the periphery like a wrongly charged particle in a cloud chamber. I don't offer this personal revelation in the hope of ahs of sympathy, and certainly not to flatter those who have the flair! But as a metaphor of the issues raised later about the misfit between professional competence and personal praxis.

In my work in the 1980 and 90s on multiethnic health care I drew on the literature and practice of transcultural training, and in working with the Royal College of Nurses and the English National Board of Nursing (ENB) I became an advocate of transcultural skills training within the national health service

Let me briefly raise with you what the message from this body of work and practice might be for our concerns here.

If we follow the influential work of Kim (1992) we can usefully make a distinction between intercultural communicative competence and cultural communicative competence. as Kim suggests :

While the content of cultural communicative competence clearly varies from culture to culture , the content of intercultural communicative competence should remain constant across all intercultural situations regardless of specific cultures involved.

(Kim 1992 p 373 )

Thus cultural communicative competence requires us to understand the cultural values, behavioural patterns and rules of interaction of specific cultures. Understanding then can be based upon a culturally sensitive reading of the others utterance. For example, I once found myself the target of a ferocious verbal assault in a Unesco working group. It took me a while to work out what I had done wrong. The problem was that the simultaneous translator was doubtless faultless in translating my English: but regrettably NOT familiar with the sweet pleasures of English irony; particularly when used by a British academic trying to be humorous. To paraphrase Hamlet ‘My words flew up, my thoughts remained obscure.’

The implications of cultural competence for understanding in multiethnic societies can be onerous. If you are a journalist, how many cultures can you reasonably acquire a viable knowledge of. Well for local journalists, certainly those communities that constitute the major minority ethnic communities in that area. But knowledge of a general culture is no guarantor of success. It does not meet the challenge of your potential ignorance regarding the diversity of opinions within a specific community. For researchers cultural competence must be appropriate to the community you claim to be working with. **Will your grant allow time for the acquisition of such competence** . In the 1970s when I was working in Leicester I got to know a GP who had a large number of Gujerati patients and I persuaded him to recruit a Gujerati receptionist who might have linguistic and cultural skills that would aid his patients . He took my advice : and had a new and major problem. His receptionist was a Brahmin and was exceedingly dismissive of his lower caste clients. Neither of us thought through our good intentions.

**Intercultural** competence ,however, offers us a whole new relationship to understanding across difference. It asks not so much what do we know about THEM, as what do I know about MYSELF. In Kim’s words

‘—individuals who hope to carry out effective intercultural interactions must be equipped with a set of abilities to be able to understand and deal with the dynamics of cultural difference, intergroup posture and the inevitable stress experience .’

( Kim 1992 p376 )

In brutally brief terms Kim's intercultural communicative competence includes three dimensions.

**The cognitive dimension** – how open am I to new ideas- do I need to reduce new experiences to familiar concept, or am I open to challenge and novelty. Do I resist alternatives to my reality.

An **affective dimension** - how have I learned to negotiate my feelings towards others. Am I empathetically open to their experience . or like Bauman's account of the stranger does difference threaten me – am I closed and defensive .

And finally a **behavioural dimension** – what is your behavioural repertoire- can you be behaviourally adaptive. Not only can you conceptually understand difference – can you DO difference. Can you – eat with your fingers, manage different normative social distances , negotiate non verbal means of signalling status and deference. Because if you can't manage the behavioural shift it may be that you are kidding yourself that you have managed the cognitive shift.

Our capacity for understanding lies not only in our **discursive consciousness**, but also in our practical consciousness –in **our embodied self**.

( anecdote)

### **Understanding understanding**

Why would I want to bring this interpersonal dimension into a discussion of multiculturalism and communication.

Well feminism powerfully introduced us to the notion that the personal is political , and I suppose I wanted to insist that whilst we can have meta- theoretical discussions about the grounding in liberalism for multiculturalism , or not. And like me you can engage in arguments about the political economy of media in multiethnic societies: all these debates are at root shaped by how we as individuals stand in relation to difference and understanding. What is it **We** put in the gap between listening and attention.

We should not allow our capacity for theoretical sophistication to obscure our own personal presence as foundational agents in shaping our unique entry into understanding understanding. And no I didn't have a mental blip. I am saying what is it we bring to our understanding of the nature of understanding. And that would include the things I have mentioned above - our foundational beliefs about the nature of sociability . our optimism-pessimism for humanity . our intercultural competence.

## Understanding as praxis or understanding as commodity

This leads me to a discussion of what is the relation between our capacity for understanding and our behaviour. I want to argue that where understanding is not followed by relevant behaviour then that failure to act will work backwards to corrupt our initial understanding. Understanding in the absence of follow through is a form of cognitive masturbation-self focused in both activity and outcome. This can easily be normalised as a form of self congratulatory moral rigour: where the fact of understanding is itself the only socially valued process. Such understanding can be an end in itself: a moral voyeurism.

I am thinking of the war on poverty and all that populist public engagement with the plight of the world poor. And the fact that the aid has not been delivered

I am thinking of our profound acquaintance with the realities of the WAR on Terror : and its erosion of consensual respect for human rights.

I am thinking of myself—I understand these things - what have I done?

I understood the Blair regimes mockery of the democratic process - what did I do.?

Could it be that a right to be understood always lives as a hostage to the possibility of their being a moralistic fashion for ‘understanding’. Could the promotion of a right to be understood generate a sensitivity to diversity that presents knowledge about the nature of diversity as a self sufficient goal. Could it become fashionable to display your ‘*understanding*’: a new form of cache in the social capital stakes

. Has that state already been achieved as we fine tune our methodological ownership of methods to acquire thick insights into difference. And, we have created an academic and non-academic market in *insightful* ethnography : to which I too have contributed.

Something of the potential dangers of this industry lies in the sensibilities it may feed. For example , I have often quoted this troubling phrase from Brown’s (2003 p67) book – Who Owns Native Culture. He says:

“ Today, white Australia needs Aboriginal Australia to keep alive the dream that there exist , somewhere not impossibly far away, forms of lived experience that retain the magical holism shattered by modernity.

*Understanding as narcissism!*

Worse: could it be that the intersection of **journalism**( and their news values), **progressive liberalism** ( and its locus in relatively affluent, relatively secure segments of society) and **academic research**( and its ambiguous relation to careers, funding, and possible radical intent) is constructing a dominant discourse of

understanding that perversely removes the *understood* as active agents in the process of how they become understood by others.

We the progressive journalists and academics, wrapped in the mantle of our good intent, and legitimated by our professional expertise are vulnerable to the temptations of such an ideological package: precisely because it gives us a wider ethical legitimacy : and it absolves us from going beyond the creation of ‘Understanding’ ..as product.: to understanding as praxis.

I am asking –**What is understanding for?**

I want to assert that understanding is not, and cannot be, a fixed cognitive entity: a discrete informational bundle; a morally weighted product of listening.

Understanding is a process, and as such it is a catalyst that actively, even dangerously, interacts and changes whatever it comes into contact with.

If we have chosen to frame understanding as a self-evident public good- a virtue in and of itself- then we have persistently neutralized its political relevance. We then meet understanding with a sense of our accomplishment in being able to comprehend – to go beyond listening. But by framing our comprehension in these terms we have no logical remit to follow insight with action.

But our inaction must necessarily corrupt our initial understanding. If we do not act when we understand inequity, was the inequity really so great: or when we have a revelatory insight into beauty but resist its challenge to our emotional and sensual routine: was the beauty revealed to us really so awesome. A mountain of psychological literature points to the power of post hoc rationalization: of our capacity to retrospectively change what we know, and to justify, normalise, our behaviour. Through such processes we actively engage in constructing our own political irrelevance. We actively contribute to social entropy- to a decay in vitality- because we are the experts on the lives of others- but dare not enter into the world as change agents ourselves. Of course the bitter irony is that our inaction is profoundly political.

If ,however,we do act on our understanding, what shall guide our action? Well, for one thing exactly those implicit preconceptions of the bases of human civility, and our own unique repertoire of intercultural competencies that we initially brought as our personal baggage into that gap between listening and understanding. So it would be well to know ourselves in order to understand something of the limitations of our capacity for understanding others and, how we may act through that understanding.

